



**MEMO / NOTE DE SERVICE**

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**TO: Chairs and Committee Members of Joint Finance and Corporate Services and Planning and Housing Committees**

**DESTINATAIRE : Président et membres du Comité des finances et des services organisationnels et du Comité de la planification et du logement**

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**FILE NUMBER: ACS2026-PDB-GEN-0005**

**SUBJECT: The Development Approvals Process and Culture**

**OBJET : Processus et culture d'approbation des demandes d'aménagement**

## **PURPOSE**

In August 2025, the Ottawa Housing Innovation Task Force brought forward 83 recommendations in three areas of focus for the City: Cost, Culture and Process. On October 8, 2025, Council endorsed the Housing Innovation Task Force recommendations ([ACS2025-SI-SPO-0002](#)) and unanimously approved a Housing Acceleration Plan consisting of 53 recommendations and five additional actions added through Committee and Council motions, including a motion directing the General Manager of Planning, Development and Building Services to report back on the City's progress in evolving the development approvals process and culture.

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the Mayor and Members of Council with an update on progress in evolving the development approvals process and culture, as directed through the Housing Innovation Task Force report and the Housing Acceleration Action Plan.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the media and amongst industry leaders, municipalities have been characterized as a barrier to housing development, with a perception that the system can be overly focused on process rather than outcomes. This sentiment was reflected locally in the discussions and ultimately the recommendations of the Housing Innovation Task Force.

Members of the Task Force spoke to the challenges associated with securing an in-person meeting and the multiple rounds of discussion to reach key milestones, such as a 'deemed complete' application. These concerns were raised in the context of a broader and increasingly complex environment, where many projects were already facing pressures related to supply chain delays, labour availability, the cost of financing over extended timelines, and soft housing market conditions.

While some members described these challenges as a "culture" issue, there was also recognition that the development approvals system operates within broader constraints and competing priorities. The discussion pointed to opportunities related to alternative organizational structures, training and staff knowledge, a greater tolerance to take risks, and leadership's willingness to provide agency to staff to make decisions. It also identified the need to improve coordination, clarity, and consistency across the system to better support timely and informed decisions.

On August 20, 2025, the Housing Innovation Task Force presented their recommendations around three pillars: Cost, Culture and Process. The Housing Acceleration Plan (HAP) was subsequently endorsed by Council in October 2025 and

built on this direction, setting out a series of actions to improve how the development approvals system operates.

The City of Ottawa continues to advance its commitment to becoming the most housing-friendly city in Canada through the implementation of the HAP and its recommendations. Over the last six months, a variety of changes to programs, policies, by-laws and incentives have positioned the City as a willing partner in the development of housing across the income spectrum.

### **Structural improvements to the planning framework**

The City has made significant progress to reduce approval timelines through targeted process improvements. This work has often exceeded the direction given by Council and has been informed by staff's front-line experience and their interest in finding better ways of working.

In particular, staff brought forward a series of significant proposed changes to processes for consideration by Committee and Council in a single meeting at the end of last year. These changes reflected both Council direction and staff's experience in identifying opportunities to simplify requirements and improve clarity for applicants.

This included streamlining plans and study requirements, reducing them from 49 to 35 by eliminating duplicative requirements or those without clear provincial authority, and providing greater clarity on which studies and plans can be required at each stage of the application process under the revised Development Application Studies and Plans (DASP) By-law.

Council also approved a comprehensive overhaul of the zoning framework, creating one of the most modern and enabling zoning systems in the country to better support gentle density, infill, and transit-oriented growth.

Collectively, these initiatives remove unnecessary barriers, improve predictability, and support the delivery of new homes more quickly and affordably in the communities where they are most needed.

Changes to the municipal development processes were driven with a clear, top-down direction from Council, informed by the Housing Innovation Task Force. However, the results to date have extended beyond that direction, reflecting the bottom-up, grassroots reflections and suggestions of staff directly engaged in the processes.

Progress on process and policy improvements has occurred against a challenging backdrop. Over the past several years, the Province has introduced multiple rounds of legislative amendments to the *Planning Act*, including several major housing bills, to

support its objective of 1.5 million homes province-wide by the end of 2031. Ottawa's share of that target was 151,000, but we failed to meet the provincial annual targets for 2024 and 2025, which resulted in the loss of provincial Build Back Better infrastructure funding tied to housing starts, despite much higher numbers of planning approvals being completed in the same period.

## **DISCUSSION**

Planning, Development and Building Services (PDBS) plays a central role in shaping how Ottawa grows. The department contributes to city-building across the full development lifecycle, starting with the policy framers that set out the context under our Official Plan and related guidance, and by-laws, through to the technical and professional staff that reviews planning applications, establishes the regulatory framework for development, and issues the permits that allow projects to move forward. The department also includes the "post-approval" structures, that protect our road allowances, support building construction and ensure the Building Code is met.

While PDBS is the core of the development system, we partner with a wide variety of City staff across departments and agencies. The work is supported by a data and evidence-based perspective along with a collaborative approach to both long-term planning and local, site-specific decision-making. This creates a rich body of information but also brings together a complex set of perspectives and voices. Addressing challenges and managing growth with both the long and short-term in mind demands an integrated approach across lines of accountability.

### **Starting with people and perspective**

Evolving the development approvals system begins with the people who operate it every day. Development staff work in an environment defined by constant change. Communities evolve. Provincial legislation shifts. Housing needs increase and evolve. At the same time, they are asked to balance long-term city building with the immediate concerns of residents and businesses.

The shift in culture begins with accepting that we need to work differently: faster, more streamlined, and we need to get to outcomes (new housing supply) sooner. At the same time, we need to remember that the development approvals system is not limited to just the approval of applications. Staff are part of a broader city-building process that ensures growth happens in a way that is livable, connected and functional. New housing must integrate with infrastructure, support mobility, and connect to parks, schools and surrounding communities. As intensification continues across Ottawa, these considerations remain central to how decisions are made. This is work that staff can

stand behind with confidence. This requires an abundant mindset. It is not either/or. It is both/and. Both faster and better.

Strengthening the development approvals system requires insight from partners outside the organization, as well as from the people who work within it daily. Together, these perspectives help identify where the system can evolve in ways that are both practical and meaningful.

### **Diagnosing where the process slows down**

To better understand how development applications move through the system, the department launched a Journey Mapping initiative.

Staff from across PDDBS participated in workshops to map how development applications move from the first point of contact through to final approval. The sessions examined the experience of various client “journeys”. Examples included a developer building a subdivision, mixed-use high-rise towers adjacent to the LRT Station, a three-storey infill development, and a resident opening a small landscaping business in a rural area. The workshops helped identify areas where processes are clear and efficient, as well as opportunities to improve coordination between teams. The intent was not to assign blame, but to understand where the process works well and where it becomes more complicated than necessary.

The exercise provided a practical learning experience for staff, offering greater visibility into how development applications move upstream and downstream of their role, and how their part in the process can either support or unintentionally hinder service delivery. It also generated a significant number of staff-identified insights, highlighting instances where responsibilities were unclear, where administrative requirements added complexity without clear value, and where applicants faced uncertainty about next steps in the approvals process.

These takeaways have also informed several structural changes that are now in place, including the significantly revised DASP By-law. Work is ongoing as staff update the terms of reference for dozens of plans and studies to incorporate current best practices and clarify triggers for required work to reduce the burden on less complex applications.

They have also shaped internal improvements implemented in February 2026, such as the “deemed complete” process (moving from planning application “completeness review” to “completeness check”) and the introduction of an escalation period to resolve cross-department comments after a single review cycle. In addition, renewed guidance has been introduced to support more actionable, succinct, timely and clear feedback to applicants.

Several other targeted projects are underway based on the findings of the review of the development approvals journey and on areas where internal changes have been identified that could enhance service delivery. The first of these include the following:

- Expanded applicant information materials to allow applicants to better anticipate what will be required in late-stage, post-approval permitting requirements, and support them in making decisions about advancing work in parallel.
- Clarifying internal and external circulation lists to ensure a single, accurate distribution approach based on accountability, with clear distinction between circulation for information and for comments to reduce the burden on applicants and better support resolution of issues between service areas.
- Reviewing the intake and annual renewal process for insurance certificates to ensure requirements are clear, consistently applied, and better aligned for their intended purposes throughout the lifecycle of a development application.
- Reviewing and updating the content provided by 3-1-1 operators when responding to development-related inquiries, to ensure residents and applicants receive clear, consistent, and accurate information.

Leadership from other departments will also be engaged to review the operational opportunities for process improvements identified by PDDBS staff. This work will help refine how development applications move through the system and improve how departments work together to support applicants. Additional continuous improvement initiatives are expected as a result over the coming year.

### **Transparency, data and outcomes**

Improving access to information about development activity builds trust with applicants, the development sector and residents alike.

Residents and Councillors often want to understand what development is occurring in their communities and how projects move through the approvals process. Making that information easier to access helps build confidence in how planning decisions are made.

Tools such as the Housing Approvals Dashboard provide real-time information on development approvals, building permits and housing construction across the city. The Dashboard currently displays data up to the end of Q2 2025 and will be updated shortly to include full 2025 information.

By tracking the number of dwellings in the planning approval process and the building permit process over time, we will be able to demonstrate process time savings, and the pace of development. Further enhancements are also planned to improve year-over-

year comparisons, better illustrate trends, and integrate more ward-specific tools to support how development activity is understood across the city.

The department will continue to leverage the Digital Twin to better understand how development is taking shape across Ottawa. This includes ongoing work to develop ward-specific mapping and 3D visualization tools to illustrate the pipeline of development and how growth is distributed across the city. These tools support a more integrated understanding of development activity, combining data, geography and planning context in a single environment.

Staff are also working to create further opportunities for timely input and engagement before matters proceed to Committee. More frequent meetings with advisory bodies, including the Planning Advisory Committee (PAC), the Federation of Citizens' Associations (FCA), Planning and Engineering Liaison Committee (PELC), Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA), The Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association (GOHBA), and others, are helping members stay informed, prepare for upcoming items, and provide input through their own delegations where appropriate.

### **Investing in people and continuing the conversation**

Culture is shaped by the day-to-day experience of staff and whether people are working toward a shared objective. Progress depends on everyone rowing in the same direction. When expectations are clear and communication is consistent, staff are better positioned to respond to challenges, stay aligned on Council priorities, and contribute ideas for continuous improvement.

Ongoing dialogue with managers and the Extended Departmental Leadership Team is a central part of how the department operates. Managers are often the first to see where processes are slowing down or where something is not working as intended. Creating space for those conversations helps surface issues early and allows for more practical, timely solutions.

There is also a continued focus on strengthening professional capacity across PDBS. One initiative, known as the 'Learning Lab', is designed to regularize continuous learning and support the diverse needs of the department and its deliverables through three streams: Corporate and Departmental Training, Individual and Cultural Development, and Knowledge Building.

A team-based approach to development files, which was already in place prior to the HAP, continues to support more consistent outcomes for applicants and residents over the life of a project. It also creates opportunities for staff to work closely together, with shared responsibility for files and greater collaboration between junior and senior staff.

The department is also taking a more deliberate approach to staffing. Efforts are focused on filling roles on a permanent basis wherever possible. Over time, this continuity provides greater stability for teams and allows relationships to develop, both internally and with external partners. It also creates a more consistent experience for those navigating the development approvals process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Organizational culture is shaped over time. It does not change overnight.

Taken together, all of these efforts are helping to strengthen a culture that is more coordinated, more open to continuous improvement, and more focused on the outcomes the development approvals system is intended to achieve.

Staff will continue advancing the initiatives described in this memorandum while identifying new opportunities to strengthen both the development approvals process and the culture that supports it.

### **Originally signed by**

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